



# SHADE TREE COMMISSION

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## **TREE PLANTING GUIDELINES**

A tree is a long-term investment. Successful planting can be simple if you follow these guidelines: If a tree cannot be planted immediately, store it upright in the shade and water daily. The root ball should be damp at all times.

### **Moving the Tree to the Planting Site:**

Do not lift the tree by the trunk or drop it to the ground suddenly. The weight of the soil may crush the roots. Lift the tree from the bottom of the ball. If there is a wire basket use the handles or top ring of the basket.

### **Digging the Hole:**

- Identify the tree's root collar – the flared trunk area just above the root system.
- Prepare the site by digging a wide saucer shape hole 1 1/2 – 3 times the width of the root ball and as deep as the root collar. Don't dig the hole too deep. It is better to have the root ball 1 – 2 inches higher than the ground level because of settling.
- Note: Take out large stones from the soil removed from the hole and mix with an equal portion of organic material.

### **Planting the Tree:**

- If tree comes wrapped in a wire basket, this should be entirely removed without disturbing the root ball. Remove the bottom of the cage, set the tree into place and clip the rest of the cage off after the tree is stabilized in the planting pit. If this is not possible, horticulturists recommend removing at least the top 12 to 18 inches (two to three levels) of wire from the root ball. This will allow the major roots and trunk to grow without any possibility of becoming girdled by the wire.
- Position the tree as straight as possible in the center of the hole and at the proper depth using care not to break the root ball.
- Remove all string, strapping and wire from around the tree's trunk.
- Remove all natural burlap from the top and at least one third down the sides of the root ball. Natural burlap can be left along the remaining two thirds of the sides of the root ball. It will usually rot in the soil. Just pulling the burlap away from the root ball and tucking it into the hole can leave air pockets in the soil and cause the roots to dry out. If the root ball is falling apart, then just remove the twine and burlap on top of the root ball and leave the rest of the burlap in place.
- Synthetic burlap does not decompose in soil, cut away as far down the root ball as possible so soil along the side of the root ball is in direct contact with back fill soil.

It is best to remove all synthetic burlap and throw it away because roots that grow through can become girdled, causing the tree to topple over or die from strangulation of the roots by the fabric.

- **Note:** If you cannot determine if burlap is natural, or synthetic, burn a small portion with a match. Synthetic burlap melts and smokes, and may not produce a flame. Natural burlap burns and turns to ash.
- Trees may require staking especially if root ball is sandy, or root system is loose.

### **Back Fill:**

As the back fill is added lightly push the soil around the roots, or water the soil to eliminate air pockets around the root ball. (Do not pack the soil after you water.) Continue to back fill to the height just below the root collar. Don't back fill the tree too deeply. After watering thoroughly, if there is not enough soil, add more and water again. After the soil is thoroughly watered, form a saucer around the tree for holding additional water.

### **Mulching:**

Weed and turf suppression during establishment is essential. Apply approximately a 3-inch thick layer of natural mulch around the tree. Keep mulch at least 4 inches away from the trunk to prevent fungus from growing on the tree trunk. (The old volcano method of mulching kills trees.)

### **Pruning:**

It is best to limit pruning of the new tree to damaged twigs or obvious defects.

### **Staking:**

Be sure tree is straight. In many instances, if root balls are heavy enough stakes are not necessary. The purpose of staking is to stabilize the root ball. If a tree requires staking, drive two stakes into the undisturbed soil at the sides of the hole, not into the root ball. Use two plastic adjustable ties securing them around the trunk and each stake. Chain link ties or wire threaded through a piece of garden hose can also be used but are less desirable as they may damage the tree. Ties should be flexible to allow slight movement of the trunk. Ties should be checked and adjusted periodically to prevent girdling of the tree. Stakes should be removed after 1 year.

### **Watering:**

Your newly planted tree will need plenty of water to get established. Water at least once a week in dry weather giving it a really good soaking (a trickle from a garden hose for ½ hour). Make sure the water penetrates the original root ball that may dry out sooner than your soil around it. Trees that are under-irrigated during the establishment period often require additional time to establish because roots grow more slowly.

References: Dr. Edward Gilman, Environmental Hort. Dept., University of Florida  
NJ Dept of Environmental Protection, Division of Parks and Forestry

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